

Ties that Bind: Cultural Interpretations of Delayed Adulthood in Western Europe and Japan¹

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Throughout the developed world, young adults hit hard by declining labor market opportunities and rising housing costs have been staying in the natal home. Particularly hard hit are the weak welfare states of southern Europe and Japan, while the social democracies have continued to support the residential independence of young people at very early ages. This article considers the divergent cultural interpretations of this pattern of “delayed departure” in order to show that the same demographic configurations may be coded quite differently.

KEY WORDS: cultural interpretation; delayed adulthood; household formation; Japan; labor market adaptations; life course; western Europe.

INTRODUCTION

On a warm spring day in 2003, I settled into a long lunch at a lovely restaurant in Madrid. I was in the company of faculty and administrators of a social science research center that was considering membership in an international network of scholars devoted to the study of inequality. As a complete newcomer to the Spanish research scene, this was my one opportunity to establish an intellectual connection and enough of a personal tie to smooth the way for our graduate students to “apprentice” at the institute. Our conversation moved easily back and forth from our work to our

¹ This paper is adapted from my Presidential Address to the Eastern Sociological Society, February 22, 2008. Support for this project was provided by the Woodrow Wilson School faculty research fund; the European University Institute welcomed my research team for our training session. Analyses presented in the figures were compiled by Sofya Aptekar and first published in our joint paper (Newman and Aptekar, 2008). I am deeply appreciative of the research assistance I received from LaTonya Trotter and Daniel Schneider, who were responsible for coding the interviews.

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lives. They talked about the long reach of Franco's regime into Spanish universities and the important role autonomous institutions like theirs had played in keeping social science alive during the fascist regime. I talked about my research on the working poor in U.S. inner cities.

After the third glass of wine, the table talk migrated to family. The elegant administrator sitting next to me, a woman in her late 50s, spoke affectionately of her 33-year-old son who lived with her while working a full-time job in the center of Madrid. Like most other mothers of her generation, she maintained full responsibility for running the household, including tending to her son's meals and his laundry, among other mundane needs. Her Spanish colleagues nodded in recognition and seemed to think the arrangement was business as usual. Taken aback by the idea of a child of such advanced age living with his parents, I asked as casually as I could what it was like to have her son at home. "Why would he ever want to leave me?" she asked in reply.

A month later, I was seated next to a beautiful canal in the center of Aarhus, the second largest city in Denmark. My dinner partner was a lawyer and part-time judge, the older brother of a good friend from my graduate school years. I had come to Aarhus to engage colleagues in political science and economics with the same network, but took the evening off to visit with this distant connection. We, too, talked about our work, but migrated naturally to the topic of our children. My youngest was in middle school with six years to go before he would leave home for college; my companion's youngest son no longer lived at home because he decided he wanted to pursue a special certificate offered at a high school located in another city, too far from Aarhus to commute. His son packed up, moved to the city to enroll in his new high school, applied for a government stipend to meet his living needs, and found a roof over his head with the help of the municipal housing office: all at age 16.

As Fig. 1 makes clear, a sharp divergence has emerged between the northern and southern European countries with respect to the residential choices of young adults. Indeed, today over 50% of the working men age 24–29 in Spain, Italy, and most of the other southern European countries still live in their natal homes. Clearly, my Spanish dinner partners were not unusual. Neither was the Danish lawyer.

These two extremes—delayed departure and early independence—are coming to define a set of trends in the formation of households that has caught the attention of demographers and sociologists (Aassve *et al.*, 2001; Billari, 2004; Cherlin *et al.*, 1997; Cook and Furstenberg, 2002). Increasingly in the advanced, postindustrial world, we are seeing a prolonged stay in the family home become the norm in countries with weak welfare states, high housing costs, and increasingly rocky pathways into

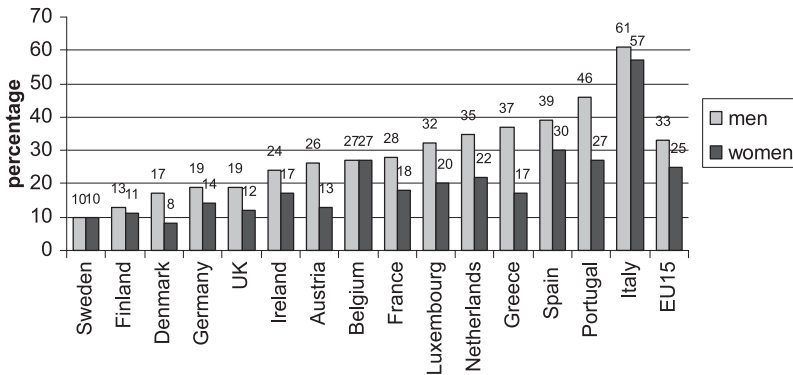


Fig. 1. Percentage of young people (18–34) living with parents without partner or children.

the labor market for “young” people. At the other end of the universe, mainly in the social democracies, we see state-subsidized experiments in independence, modern-day continuations of home leaving that have been the hallmark of northern European countries as far back as the Middle Ages, when unmarried youth left their homes to work as servants in the homes of the wealthy.

Perhaps the most extreme example of delayed departure is to be found in Japan. Among unmarried men age 30–34, over 60% live with their parents; 70% of unmarried women in this age group live at home as well. The proportions are even higher for unmarrieds in younger age groups (e.g., 25–29, where the number rises to 80% of women and 64% of men).³ In many cultures, including Japan, the custom is for young men and women to remain with their parents until they marry. In the Japanese case, though, the age of marriage has been rising steadily. In 2006, the mean age at marriage was 28 for women and 30 for men (Ministry of International Affairs and Communication, 2007), the highest in the developed world.

Why have these divergent patterns developed and what do they mean for citizens, young and old, in Europe and Japan? The first question is fairly easily answered by a quick review of the changing economic context of adulthood in southern Europe and Japan. The second is more complex and requires a comparative, qualitative approach designed to uncover the emergent subjective, culturally inflected understandings of autonomy and independence, of the appropriate forms of support—material and moral—that define the relationship between parents and their adult children.

³ These data come from Raymo (2003).

THE “PRICE OF INDEPENDENCE”⁴

Several interconnected economic trends have conspired to limit the residential options of young adults in southern Europe and Japan. Foremost among them are deleterious labor market conditions. Unemployment has always been higher in southern Europe than in the north. But starting in the 1980s, the toll of globalization began to make itself felt more strongly, prompting governments in Spain, Japan, and elsewhere to loosen the controls that had long encouraged life-time employment. This gave firms the flexibility (for the first time) to employ workers on part-time or temporary contracts (Golsch, 2003; Kosugi, 2004). Older workers with a strong foothold in the labor market were largely able to avoid the consequences, but younger workers and job seekers quickly found themselves in an unfamiliar world. Today, for example, over one-third of Spanish workers overall are governed by short-term agreements, but well over 50% of Spanish male workers 25–29 years of age are subject to these less desirable work arrangements.

In Japan, a similar trend has emerged and has been popularly recognized by the term “freeters,” denoting individuals between the ages of 15–34 who “neither go on to higher education nor become full time employees. They are most likely to work as part time employees under short or temporary employment contracts” (Katsumata, 2003:17). The category emerged on the national scene in the late 1980s when the “bubble economy” burst and, as in Spain, the government responded by liberalizing the terms of labor agreements (Kosugi, 2004). In 1982, there were an estimated 0.5 million freeters in Japan. By 2002, there were 2 million and rising (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, 2003, cited in Honda, 2005:1).

Temporary employment is strongly associated with co-residence of young people with their parents. As Fig. 2 suggests, even without including Italy (which is an extreme outlier), the $R = .35$. This would not be the case everywhere in the world, for in some countries (notably the United States), youth in a weak labor market position could elect a variety of residential options besides co-residence with their natal families. They could live with roommates, pool their income with romantic partners, or seek out rental housing in marginal neighborhoods. Remaining with Mom and Dad is hardly the only option. It is, however, for young people living in countries with very high levels of owner-occupied housing. As Fig. 3 makes clear, the southern countries of Europe are heavily invested in owner-occupied housing. Over 85% of the population in Spain

⁴ This is the title of the Russell Sage volume in which the data presented in this section first appeared. See Newman and Aptekar (2008).

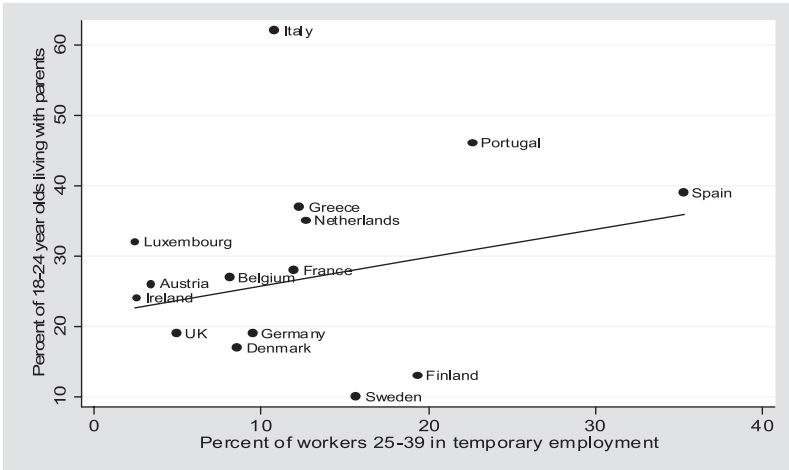


Fig. 2. Proportion of 18–34-year-olds living with parents by proportion of young workers (aged 25–39) in temporary employment. Linear fit without Italy, $R = .35$.
Source: Eurostat, Statistical Office of the European Communities (2003).

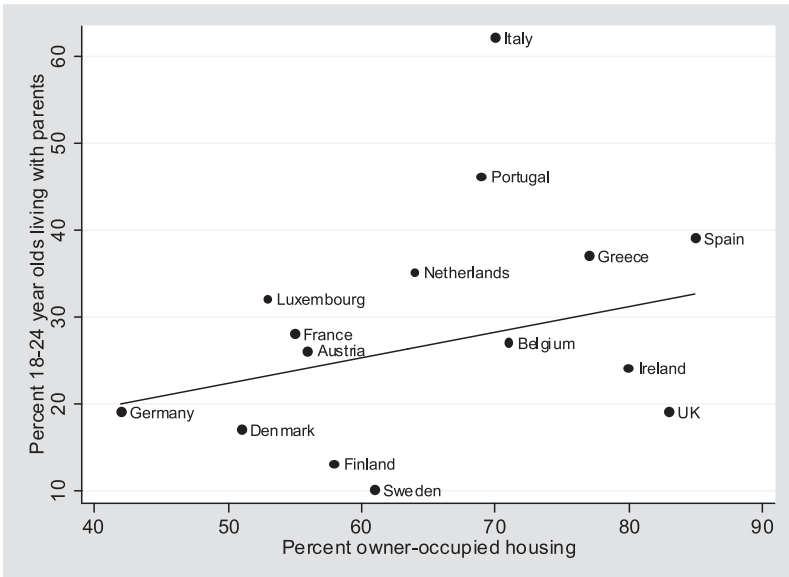


Fig. 3. Proportion of 18–34-year-olds living with parents by percentage of owner-occupied housing. Linear fit without Italy, $R = .37$.
Source: OECD Economic Review No. 38 2004/1.

lives in owner-occupied housing, and Greece and Portugal are not far behind.

Home ownership in the Nordic countries, on the other hand, falls between 60–65% and the difference is made up by a large rental sector, much of it public housing regulated by the government. Rental stock is critical for young people striking out on their own without the savings necessary to buy their own homes. Banks are skeptical of their earning power, now sharply curtailed by temporary employment, and will not lend them mortgage money. And compared to the United States where, until the subprime lending implosion of 2008, banks routinely agreed to lend 80–90% of the value of a home, European banks typically expect to lend only 50%, thus raising the stakes required for new entrants to the housing market.

These structural conditions are common to the southern European countries in Fig. 1 and, taken together, it is hardly surprising that they produce a rising tendency for adults under the age of 40 to stick closer to home. The combination of labor market reforms that disadvantaged new entrants to the world of work (Golsch, 2003) and high levels of owner-occupied housing is toxic for young people desirous of residential independence (Holdsworth, 2000; Holdsworth and Solda, 2002).

We might expect this situation to produce a great deal of frustration as adults come to feel infantilized by their residential dependence or tension in households that have one too many adults for the social space available. Newman and Aptekar (2008) show that prolonged residence in the natal home does indeed produce dissatisfaction. Yet the more common the pattern, the less powerful the stigma. Indeed, as it becomes normative for adults in their 30s to live with their parents, the sense of being out of step with others of the same age recedes and some of the “silver lining” of co-residence becomes more salient. Indeed, survey data on life satisfaction indicates that southern Europeans see the bright side of “delayed departure” (Jurado Guerrero, 2001), even as governments go into overdrive trying to reverse the most troubling outcome: low fertility.

But there are significant variations across countries in life satisfaction and the differences reflect divergent interpretations of the meaning and social significance of prolonged quasi-adolescence. In some countries, these silver linings are the focus of attention when the issue surfaces. In others, the frustrations are magnified and the problem achieves the status of a “national disaster.” Moreover, in the Nordic social welfare states, where young people typically leave home at 18 and can rely on state support to facilitate independence (Mulder and Manting, 1994; Mulder and Hooimeijer, 2002), in-depth interviews make it clear that there are “problems in paradise,” an emergent set of worries about what the *lack* of dependency between generations means for social solidarity and emotional well-being.

COMPARATIVE DATA

To explore these subjective understandings of the “failure to launch” on the one hand and “accelerated independence” on the other, I turn now to set of in-depth qualitative interviews gathered by my research team⁵ across four European countries and Japan in the summer of 2006.⁶ With a total of 250 interviews across five countries, we cannot claim that these samples are representative in any definitive way. Yet considerable effort was made to draw the sample from different geographical regions (e.g., northern, southern, and central Italy, capital cities such as Madrid and Tokyo, rural regions in northern Spain and northern Sweden, wealthy areas, and poor regions such as Puglia in Italy). Conducted in homes and cafes in different regions of each country, by native speakers of the national language, the data incorporate the perspectives of parents and adult children in the same families wherever it proved possible and in different families where it was regarded as a breach of privacy to contact both parent and child in the same family.⁷

Table I presents a description of the interview sample. In the “delayed departure” countries of Spain, Italy, and Japan, the general emphasis was placed on sampling parents with adult children over the age of 22 in residence⁸ and children who live at home, while a smaller proportion of the sample exemplifies the nonnormative status of independent children and their parents. The reverse was the case in the Nordic countries of Sweden and Denmark, where the majority of the

⁵ I am immensely grateful to my interviewers, Emanuela Zilio (Italy), Katarina Andersson (Sweden), Marie Kappel (Denmark), Maria Gomez Garrido (Spain), and Noriko Matsumoto (Japan), whose dedication to the difficult task of creating the sample and conducting the interviews made this research possible.

⁶ The snowball sample was recruited by research assistants born and raised in each country who relied on distant parts of their personal networks to begin with (e.g., friends of their siblings they did not know well, friends of acquaintances, etc.). They gathered names from their initial informants and selected one at most to pursue and snowballed in a similar fashion with each interview. Much of the information gathered was sensitive and anyone closer than this might have been very hesitant to share it if they thought there was any chance their replies would filter back to their children/parents.

⁷ In our experience, Japanese parents were unwilling to be interviewed if their own children were contacted and vice versa. Spanish and Italian parents and children were not only comfortable with the idea that both generations would be interviewed, but often insisted that the interviews take place in the family home and seemed unconcerned about privacy. The norm for Nordic parents and their children is to live apart from one another and hence while the interviews often encompassed different generations of the same family, there was little concern about privacy between them because they are already autonomous.

⁸ This age bar was set to try to capture an average postcollege-age child, but this proved more difficult to judge than originally expected because in many European countries (including the Nordic social democracies), the duration of education is elongating rather dramatically partly in response to weaker labor market opportunities and an effort to reduce social exclusion.

Table I. Sample Description

	Italy	Spain	Japan	Denmark	Sweden
Total sample	52	50	50	49	51
<i>Co-Residing Respondents</i>					
Parents who live with adult children	9	22	19	2	5
Proportion of all parents	35%	88%	76%	8%	19%
Proportion of co-resident who are female	67%	68%	50%	100%	100%
Children who live with parents	9	17	20	4	4
Proportion of all children	35%	68%	80%	16%	16%
Proportion of co-residents who are female	33%	53%	58%	25%	75%
<i>Independent Respondents</i>					
Parents who live independently of adult children	17	3	6	22	21
Proportion of all parents	65%	12%	24%	92%	81%
Children who live independently of parents	17	8	5	21	21
Proportion of all children	65%	32%	20%	84%	84%
<i>Ages of Respondents</i>					
Mean age of all children*	28.5	27.1	27.8	25.7	22.4
Mean age of co-residing children	28.2	26.7	26.8	26.3	21.7
Mean age of independent children	28.7	28.0	31.6	25.6	22.5
Mean age of all parents**	57.2	54.9	56.5	53.1	57.3
Mean age of co-residing parents	56.1	55.1	55.4	61.0	50.0
Mean age of independent parents	57.8	53.7	60.2	52.7	57.8

*Age of children missing for 1/25 in Spain and 4/25 in Sweden.

**Age of parents missing for 3/25 in Spain; 1/24 in Denmark; 9/26 in Sweden.

sample consisted of nonresident children over the age of 22 and their parents and a “minority” population of resident children over 22 and their parents.⁹

SIGNS OF METAMORPHOSIS

The three countries I studied, where adults in their late 20s and early 30s are increasingly remaining in their natal homes—Spain, Italy, and Japan—share a striking similarity. Parents’ memories of their own transition to adulthood suggest an abrupt transformation. But children’s perceptions of the same process suggest a slow, undifferentiated metamorphosis. For the parents, there was a before (childhood) and an after (adulthood) that was marked by clear behavioral changes in their lives. For both mothers and fathers in Spain, marriage, full-time employment, and childbearing were the dividing lines.

⁹ By focal child, I mean the adult child who is either the informant or the child on whom we are focusing attention in the parent interviews. Parents in our sample often had more than one child, but our questions pertained to one particular child over the age of 22.

Interviewer: When you were young, what marked the change of growing up?

Respondent: Having a job and ... and getting independence. As soon as you had a job you were partly independent, obviously ... The thing is that these days you are not independent because the money you earn doesn't allow you to pay for a house. And so you always have to depend on third parties, family members who have to help you. In the past they also had to help you, but not in the same way people have to do it these days. (Spain, Age 59, Male)

Another said:

Respondent: I was marked by marriage. Totally. I married at 20, and that changed my life.

Interviewer: That implied a change in your life.

Respondent: Yes, totally. It was ... the biggest change in my life; I think so, yes. (Spain, Age 45, Female)

In Japan as well, older men and women understood their lives as a set of marked status transitions with very clear lines that separated their youthful lives from their adult lives. Marriage was the essential boundary condition.

Adulthood means that one can live a respectable life. For example, to fulfill social responsibilities. Only if one was raising children and leading a married life respectably, could one be considered an adult. (Japan, Age 69, Male)

Another said:

Marriage was the only pathway for us to be an adult. Since marriage meant to leave your parents' home and become independent, in a sense, to live on your own. At that time, there were not many women who gained jobs. (Japan, Age 60, Female)

What does adulthood mean to the younger generation of mature adults who are living with their parents in these countries? How do they mark the transition to adulthood when many of the traditional markers—full-time jobs, independent residence, marriage—are years off? First, they argued that there were no longer any behavioral markers of adulthood at all. Maturity is more of a feeling, a capacity to make decisions or take some greater degree of responsibility for their actions. Such a feeling can arise even inside the natal home where some of the more demanding responsibilities that come with economic independence are years away.

Interviewer: So for you a person can be an adult, even if he lives with his parents ...

Respondent: He can be an adult, of course ... Because in many cases you can't get independence before 30. I don't consider that they aren't adults. The main thing is that you take your responsibilities, that you assume your actions, and that you don't depend on your parents for everything. (Spain, Age 25, Male)

The transition to adulthood has many more stages and none are canonical or socially recognized. The “fits and starts” quality of the change leaves a great deal of room for ambiguity and, indeed, ambiguity is the pronounced cultural ethos. Our interviewees in their 20s and 30s are aware that their parents’ generation could rely on publicly acknowledged markers of status transitions and cannot completely shake the notion that they should have some as well, even if they are different in kind. But they do not have them and, as a result, Spanish and Japanese people in their late 20s are unsure about how to locate themselves along the adolescent/adulthood continuum. They know they are not teenagers any more; but they do not see themselves as full fledged grownups either.

“When I was in high school,” a Japanese woman of 28 told us, “college students seemed to be very adult ...”

But when I became a college student, I did not feel I was an adult in particular. Then I thought if I began work, I might feel that I was an adult. But after actually beginning work, I still do not feel I am an adult. Of course I think having social responsibility means adulthood, and in that sense I now have that responsibility. And I look like an adult in appearance, but I do not have any sense that I am an adult.

The mix of roles she inhabits (a worker, who is old enough to be a mother, but one who is unmarried and lives at home) leads to an ambiguous placement in the spectrum of roles in a society that has, until her generation, had very clear criteria for social placement.

Given the structural barriers that prevent Japanese and Spanish young people from striking out on their own, we might imagine that the opposite situation would prevail in the Nordic countries. After all, early departure from the family home is the norm and none of our informants indicated it was a high hurdle. Educational benefits are generous, transitional housing (dormitories, rental housing, public housing) is plentiful, and the expectations for residential autonomy are widespread. Parents rarely express any reservations about letting their children fly from the nest. If anything, they are urged to strike out on their own and people who remain with their parents after the age of 18 are regarded as odd-balls. “The safety nets we have developed through the Nordic welfare political approach have really made a difference,” one 50-year-old Swedish mother explained.

I guess that is an incentive for our whole welfare politics, that you don’t have to be dependent over the generations ... According to our values, you shouldn’t stay at home too long. You’re supposed to go out and support your self, live on your own.

She knows what she is talking about because she, too, left home at an early age. Unlike the Japanese or the Spaniards, for whom the parental experience of independence (early residential autonomy following early

marriage) was very different from that of their adult children (late residential independence and very late marriage), the Nordic model has been in place for at least three generations, if not even longer. In the period before World War II, when Sweden was a more agrarian society than it is today, remaining at home until marriage—which came fairly late—was normative. But Swedish society is far more urbanized today and has been for decades now. The welfare state supports that underwrite experiments in youthful independence have been in place a long time and hence the experience of the adjacent generations interviewed for this project is very similar.

Given this continuity, one might expect a similar conception of the transition to adulthood to hold across the living generations. Not so fast. Our interviews suggest that in Sweden and Denmark, the younger generation is closer to their age mates in Japan and Spain: migrating slowly toward a sense of independence, rather than experiencing a sharp before and after. Despite a very high rate of residential autonomy, Nordic 20-somethings still feel that they are gradually—and through many undetermined stages—migrating toward adulthood. Why the similarity with societies that throw structural roadblocks in the way of residential independence?

First, our interviews made it clear that though Danish and Swedish young people move out, they do not necessarily move very far. Many Scandinavian young adults live near their natal homes, even if they inhabit separate dwellings. Often, they live across the street and continue to take meals with their families, particularly in the 18–20-year-old period. Second, Nordic countries are among the world's most generous "education states," and keep their young people in school for a longer period of time than virtually any other part of the world (Nilsson and Strandh, 1999). As Fig. 4 shows, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, and Norway have the highest proportion of people in the 18–24 age group in school compared to rest of Europe. To the extent that being a student is a disqualification for

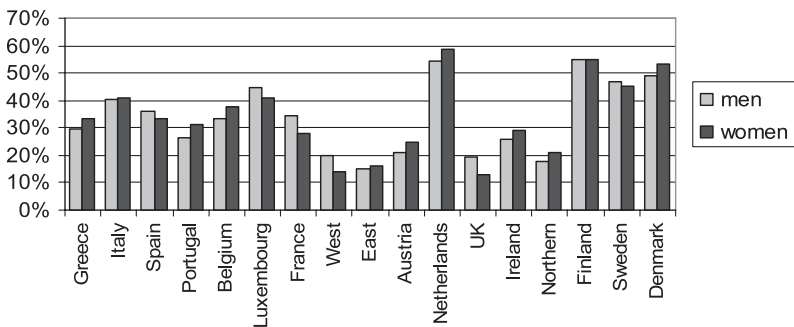


Fig. 4. Percentage of 18–24-year-olds who are students in 2001, by sex.

adulthood, it is little surprise that they see themselves as autonomous from their families, but not fully responsible for themselves.

Yet it would be a mistake to fully equate the southern and northern Europeans in the way they think about adulthood, for in a number of critical ways they experience the slow movement toward independence differently. In the south, dependence on the family for one’s economic survival is very pronounced, while in the north, this tie is far weaker, replaced by part-time earnings and reliance on the state (in the form of education aid). Figure 5 shows very high—and increasing—levels of economic dependence of 18–24-year-olds on parental support in the

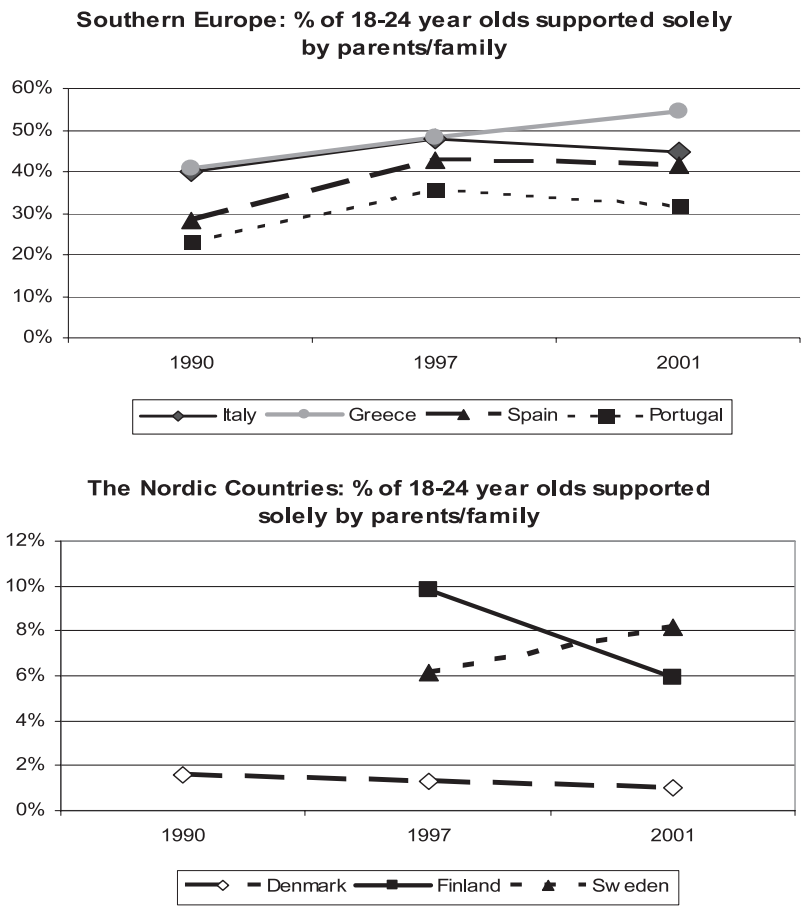


Fig. 5. Percentage of 18–24-year-olds supported solely by parents/family: southern Europe versus Nordic countries.

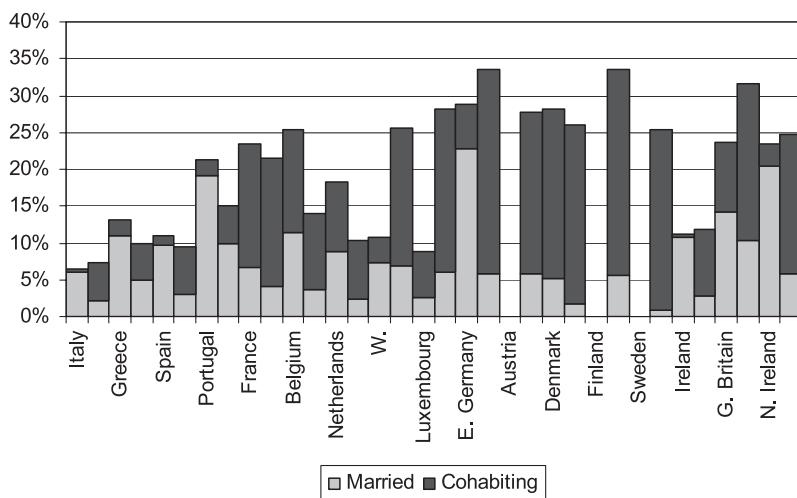


Fig. 6. Partnership among 18–24-year-olds in 1990 and 2001.

south, while extremely low and in two cases falling levels of parental responsibility for children's support in the Nordic countries. Moreover, as Fig. 6 makes clear, partnership (mainly cohabitation) is much higher in the north than the south, again suggesting a greater degree of separation from the natal home, but one that occurs in a gradual fashion in terms of individual economic self-reliance.

WHY DID EVERYTHING CHANGE?

Having established that there are significant differences “on the ground” in the process and pace of the movement toward adulthood, it remains to understand why the change took place. The demographic facts point toward an overdetermined outcome as has already been explained. But the subjective explanation for the change is another matter.

The Spanish parents in this study grew up under Francisco Franco, whose traditional, authoritarian rule forms a vivid backdrop to the present. Under Franco, birth control was illegal, as was cohabitation. Early marriage and childbearing, supported by the Catholic Church and the government, was expected and no alternatives were acceptable. Franco's death, in 1975, brought this period to an end, but bequeathed to the modern era two fundamental cultural changes: (1) an appreciation for flexibility and intimacy (as opposed to rigidity and intergenerational

distance) and (2) a tendency to explain personal experience through a structural and political lens.

The growing economic insecurity of Spain's workers in their 20s and 30s is recognized very clearly by their parents as a principal reason for their continued residence in the family home. And what, in turn, caused the insecurity? As this Spanish mother in her late 50s explained, it was the government. "When I was young," she explained, "people got independence earlier."

As soon as you entered a slightly strong company, you already knew that you had ... [security] like a civil servant. You could search for housing in a particular area, because you knew "I work here." But nowadays you never know. Perhaps you're working one year and perhaps on the next year you are on a different job. And with these rubbish contracts, people can never get independence. You find people in their 30's and 40's at home. But it is not because they don't want to ... It is only because you can't leave.

The "rubbish contracts" she derides did not come out of thin air; they resulted from legislation passed by the Spanish government intent on providing firms greater flexibility as a way of responding to globalization pressures. An elongated system of higher education that is not matched by professional job opportunities leaves Spanish workers overqualified for the jobs that are available and frustrated by the gap between their expectations and the realities coming their way.

Neither the parents nor the adult children turn inward to discover the cause of their distress; they look over their shoulders to the government, the corporate world, to elites and other powerful actors who have shaped their options from the top down. Indeed, in 2007, there were sit-down strikes in the middle of Madrid protesting high housing prices and demanding government intervention on behalf of young people who are on the losing end of a ferociously expensive housing market.

The Japanese explanation for the prolonged dependence could not be more divergent. Despite the fact that Japan experienced a bubble economy that contracted sharply, raising unemployment and creating the conditions for the emergence of the temporary worker—the freeter noted earlier—the narratives that account for changing patterns of adulthood make virtually no reference to these structural conditions.

Instead, like the Americans profiled by Newman (1993) 15 years ago, who were trying to explain intergenerational downward mobility and the "failure" of young people to become more autonomous from their parents, the Japanese turn to a moral narrative of blame. Mothers and fathers argued that the younger generation is spoiled by affluence, paralyzed by a surplus of choices, and has emerged into their late 20s in

defective condition. How did this sorry state of affairs come to be? “We did it,” answer the baby boom parents.

Because our time was very tough, our generation has spoiled our children, in disciplining and educating them at home. What we see in society now is the result of that. We baby boomers went through a hard time. So we wanted to make the life of our children easy—I think this was true in any family. I think that the major portion of the problems of youth now is derived from our generation. We are responsible for it, for example, in terms of disciplining at home. (Japan, Age 57, Male)

The postwar United States experienced its most sustained period of economic prosperity in the country’s modern history; however, the Japanese economy took much longer to recover from the ravages of World War II. As such, the baby boom generation in Japan grew up in hardship, only to emerge into a stunning period of economic growth in adulthood. As this father explains, they wanted to shield their children from what they had experienced and, in his view, took their concern too far: they spoiled their kids and failed to provide them with the kind of discipline necessary to achieve adulthood in the contemporary era.

From the boomer parents’ perspective, young people in Japan are no longer willing to buckle down to the demands of society and take their place in the social structure. Women no longer wish to serve their husband’s parents, as was the absolute norm in the past. Young men are unwilling to chain themselves to the corporation. And both men and women are more self-centered and less other-directed. As one middle-aged Japanese woman explained: “If they are to raise children, [young adults] will not have sufficient free time for themselves”

They cannot be as free. I feel there are many people who think selfishly that way. Young people do not have a sense that having children is an obligation.

But the elders are not unique in seeing the next generation in such a negative light. The young adults in our interview sample concur, as this 23-year-old man makes clear.

In the past, I think people wanted to have children once they were married. If the necessary costs were to increase because of that, they worked to cover that cost ... Now, people think about the necessary expenses for themselves first. They then think about how much they can spend on their children.

The period of rising economic success in Japan was accompanied by the emergence of the well-known workaholic, the “salaryman.” While mothers stayed home to raise their children, fathers in the primary, corporate sector gave their lives over to the firm. The specter of fathers who “worked to death,” spent 6 days a week far from home, and their evening hours drinking in the company of male friends from the workplace, has led to a retrospective sense that the “absent father” is responsible for the

decaying moral center of today's 30-somethings. "While fathers were working hard in pursuit of economic growth," one 57-year-old mother explained, "they never looked back on their family."

They didn't know what was going on with their children and this is the case for my family ... There was no place in the family where the father could convey their dignity or their way of living to form the basis of human character for their children. That is, as I said before, affecting young people, making their spirit hollow. (Japan, Age 57, Female)

The absent father and the lonely mother are less central to the popular diagnosis of fault lines in the Japanese family structure (at least not as central as the "parasite singles" [Genda, 2000; Lunsing, 2003] or "freeters"), but they emerge in our interviews as explanations for why today's young adults are abandoning established pathways toward responsible adulthood. Parents see that a retrospective critique of the traditional postwar family is gathering force among their children, one that casts a troubling light on the marriages of the elders. "I wonder if our married life did not look so happy to [my daughter]" mused a 60-year-old Japanese mother. "That may be the reason why she could not decide on getting married ..."

I worked hard at mothering and was playing the role of a daughter-in-law and a wife. I was thinking that I was very happy. But perhaps, [my daughter] was really looking at the inside. [laugh] She was seeing through the reality. So now I think maybe we weren't that happy. That is the reason why she could not have hopes, or dreams for marriage There are many situations where parents are deceiving each other about their marital life. I think children are watching that, and that may be the reason why there are many young people who do not get married. (Japanese, Age 60, Female)

In sharp contrast to the Spanish or Italian interviews, which emphasize the difficulties young people face in finding good jobs or affordable housing, Japanese informants equate intergenerational change with moral dilemmas and failings catalyzed by the internal climate of the family or the questionable socialization practices of the senior generation.

At times, these moralistic interpretations verge on social hysteria as interviewees describe the country's very social structure as crumbling under the weight of change.¹⁰ They speak in dire tones of disintegrating solidarity and traumas unheard of in the past becoming commonplace. The emergence of the *hikkimori*, young men who have shut themselves into their bedrooms and refused to come out—for years—has captured the dark side of the Japanese imagination. Examples of unspeakable crime committed within families are the focus of an avalanche of press coverage.

¹⁰ For a much more detailed treatment of Japanese preoccupations with social collapse, see David Leheny (2006).

Why are these forms of deviance becoming so common? This 66-year-old Japanese mother understands exactly what has happened.

Let's say the father is a corporate man and does not concern himself with his family. His family can live on his salaries, but children do not grow up just by money. In this way, children cannot grow up properly. That is why things like "*hikikomori*" [shut-ins] are happening, or even if young people get a job they stop going to work. When the child is small, this is manifested in their refusal to go to school. In other words, children are victims. Additionally, what is quite noticeable these days is domestic violence, murdering of family members. I think that the root problems lie there [weakening family relationships].

A father in his late 50s concurs, with his own apocalyptic vision.

[Young adults] treat human life lightly ... There are news reports that they buried someone while she or he was alive, or they murdered someone—there are so many incidents like that. That is because they see other human beings only as things. (Japan, Age 59, Male)

Baby boom parents are not alone in their fearful sense of social collapse. Their children see the situation in similar terms.

There was an incident in Japan recently, a girl was making her mother drink poison, and she was keeping a diary of her observations of her mother. Young people are confused about the real world and the world of fantasy they create. The number of children, or youth, who cannot tell the difference between the virtual and the real, seems to be increasing. (Japan, Age 28, Female)

In none of the other interview samples did we find evidence of such concern for the very fabric of the society, not even in the south of Italy where daily violence is more than an occasional possibility. In Japan, we see real worry over the country's future and a moralistic account of how these problems developed in the first place: they were created by the parents themselves.

SILVER LININGS

Although remaining in the natal nest means that genuine independence is a distant goal, the parent-child bond is nonetheless evolving toward a different state than the typical "top-down" relationship characteristic of adolescence. Somewhere between adult autonomy and child-like dependency lies the middling state of "in house adulthood," a more egalitarian relationship that enables the adult child to come and go or develop intimate relations with others, while maintaining a close bond with his or her parents. This evolution can be smooth or bumpy, depending on how much autonomy the son or daughter demands and the comfort level of their parents with this "new creature" in their midst. It can also become a

source of genuine pleasure for both parties, even when forms of economic coercion (a poor job market, short-term contracts, exorbitant housing costs) have necessitated the arrangement.

The pleasure often derives from a contrastive experience that the older generation remembers all too well from their own childhood. As they look backward, they remember their relations with their fathers as ones of emotional distance, a mixture of respect and fear. A Spanish mother in her early 60s recalled that her father was rarely at home and when he was, she stayed out of his way in order to avoid disapproval. "My father never put his hand on us," she acknowledged, "but with a single gaze from my father we could be dead." She did not want that kind of relationship with her own children. Instead, she wanted to be sure that they could confide in her and their father and felt emotionally close. "This [fear] has never existed in my children's generation," she noted with a degree of pride. "I didn't want it to exist and my husband didn't either."

That desire for a closer relationship helps sustain a more flexible bond as the adult child's role in the household shifts with age. Instead of the parents feeling as though they are suffocating the adult child, they see the silver lining in their continued affection and closeness. "I've seen my children much at home here, very happy," explained a 53-year-old Spanish mother.

I haven't felt they were inhibited nor daunted, nor ... for example, angry about being still here at home. They know that ... here the door is always open. The chair and the table to sit and talk ... I understand that it may be a problem in certain homes ... because ... living together may be difficult for them, [but] ... My children have never disturbed me, nor will they ever do, I believe. Just the opposite.

Her daughter, in her late 20s, saw the relationship in very similar, egalitarian terms.

We have a more personal relationship with our parents. We can tell them many more things, I think they know us much better than their parents knew them ... We may be influenced by our parents' opinion, but it is not an imposition as it was in the past. Like my parents perhaps went to buy a house and that is something they also had to discuss with my grandparents. And I don't think that's the case any longer.

Japanese parents reported the same kind of softening in their relations with their children and felt the same contrast with their own experience of a childhood under the thumb of more austere and distant fathers. Some agreed with their Spanish counterparts that the modern approach of empathy and support from parent to child was a blessing.

Others were not so sure. Equality may lead to lack of respect according to many Japanese boomers. "Parents do not face their children with

confidence,” according to a 51-year-old Tokyo mother who seems to lament the passing of the patriarchal model.

The father used to be called the mainstay of the family—there was one person in the family whom the children could not disobey. There are still families like that, but generally, parents and children relate to each other as though they are friends. What derives from that kind of relationship is that children begin to think whatever they say will be accepted. They become impatient.

NORDIC BLUES

For Americans, the Nordic countries appear, at first blush, to be something close to nirvana. Decisions that pose major challenges to adults and youth in other societies—whether to go to university, live independently, place a child in daycare, find care for an aging parent—are barely constrained by finances. The generosity of the welfare state in Sweden and Denmark removes these concerns. Indeed, the major responsibility parents and their children feel involves checking to be sure whether state-provided services are being properly administered (not whether they are affordable). University education is free, healthcare is universal and inexpensive, child- and eldercare are plentiful and largely free. The social democracies are particularly generous to their youth, providing extensive educational benefits and underwriting among the longest average period of higher education in the Western world.

This exceptional support is delivered through a direct relationship between the citizen¹¹ and the state. While the southern European states direct whatever social welfare benefits their people are entitled to through the head of the household, the northern states developed a different tradition. Every resident is entitled to particular benefits regardless of his or her household configuration or marital status and these resources are delivered to them as individuals rather than as daughters, sons, or wives.

It is hard for Americans, or southern Europeans, to imagine that anything could be troubling Scandinavians about their social system (apart, perhaps, from the high taxes they pay to make it run). Yet the interviews with Swedish and Danish parents and their adult children, the vast majority of whom have lived independently of one another since the younger generation turned 18, suggests that the absence of dependence can weaken the affective bonds between generations. This might be regarded as a virtue because children are not forced back into the arms of their parents to survive economically. Instead, they can elect the level of interaction

¹¹ Much of it is available to all residents, regardless of citizenship.

they have with their families. Yet the young people in our sample worry that their culture has become too distant, as if lack of financial dependency has created emotional distance that is not healthy.

"In comparison to others," a young woman (age 22) explained, "Danes are a bunch of rootless creatures."

[This is] due to the fact that we leave home so early, but also due to the fact that we are individualists. I don't know whether it would be different if we didn't move out so soon. ... Maybe if you stayed with your parents for a longer while, you wouldn't feel like you didn't get enough love.

When asked why Denmark is so different from Italy in the pattern of home leaving, a young man (age 25) explained that in southern countries "people care more about being with their families." And they do not mind living close to each other. He saw his own culture as intolerant of that kind of intimacy, almost running from it. "In Denmark," he remarked, "people probably wouldn't want to share a room with a sibling."

Young people were not the only ones in the Nordic countries who felt that their societies were suffering from intergenerational distance. A middle-aged Swedish woman tried to explain the extremes to which the inward-turning concerns of each generation could damage the youth.

Lots of young people are left to themselves; meanwhile their parents focus on career. I mean what is supposed to happen to these children, they might end up having mental break downs or maybe they hit the bottle.

In the interviews for this project, we tried to get at the evolving nature of parent-child relations across the five countries by asking parents what kind of responsibility they have for their children at the age of 15, 20, 25, and 30. At a very early age, Scandinavian parents regard themselves as largely done with parental obligations because the state steps in and replaces them. "As far as the law goes," one middle-aged Swedish mother told me, "we have the responsibility to provide for our kids until they are 20 or something like that ... until they're out of high school." But, she went on to say, the sooner a child could be weaned from family resources and directed to municipal authorities, the better.

I think that once you're done with school and don't have a job that because of the structure of our society, that they should be able to replace what we give with help from either the work agency ... or whoever it is that takes care of that. And if that's not possible, or you need more, you can go to welfare authorities [*socia-len*].

Unlike the southern European societies, and Japan, the Nordic countries have experienced little change between the living generations in patterns of independence. Social democracy has brought to these

countries a generous welfare state that has been in place for three generations now and hence the norms of early independence and the consequent lack of financial interdependence is a fact of life. It has brought great benefits to Nordic residents, but it has also left them wondering, at times, whether they have created a more anomic social order than they bargained for. And this is nothing new; it has been a nagging concern for many years.

CULTURAL THREATS

To this point, I have dwelled mainly on the interpersonal dimensions of the demographic shift that has seen southern European and Japanese adults devote more of their 20s and 30s to co-residence with their parents. The interpretations they offer of the meaning of this change are inflected with political frustration (in Spain), personal affection (in Italy), and condemnation of the cultural defects of younger generations (in Japan). Yet in all three countries, there is another refrain at work that focuses less on the personal and more on the national consequences of the changes that are taking place in household formation.

Delayed independence, the slow pace of household formation, and declining fertility has coincided with an increase of in-migration from their former colonies. As is true for immigrants in the United States, fertility levels are higher for the newcomers than they are for the native born.¹² On the face of it, this would seem a positive solution to the “birth dearth” that is plaguing western Europe, one that Japan (with extremely low levels of immigration) might do well to emulate. However effective increasing immigration is for filling the lower ranks of the labor market, it puts strain on the welfare states of the Nordic countries and contributes to a rising xenophobia in southern Europe, where the tradition of immigration and the ethnic diversity it produces is largely unfamiliar.

Spanish parents, who recognize that their own adult children have delayed giving birth to the next generation, are aware that immigrants are plunging ahead with the task of raising their families. “Spanish families have less and less children,” one man in his 50s explained.

I see that foreign people have more children. They are the ones who are raising the birth rate, because otherwise, what would we do? [laugh] But Spanish families are having less and less children.

¹² Westoff and Frejka (2007) show that Muslim families in western Europe have more children than their non-Muslim counterparts, but their family size declines with every generation, just as it is falling in their countries of origin.

This is not a neutral observation. Spanish elders believe that the high birth rates of foreigners coupled with the low fertility of the native born will change the character of the country: it will not be Spain any more. Another 50-year-old agreed with this observation and thought the authorities should do something to reverse course. "I think the government ... should do something," she said.

If we continue like this we are going into a wrong track. A wrong track. We'll have to bring even more foreigners than we already have now. And I don't think that's positive.

The Nordic states have not seen such precipitous declines in fertility, but they, too, express concern about immigrants in their midst, more because they perceive the newcomers as more conservative and hence less tolerant of their cultural freedoms. Even more troubling to many in the social democracies is the possibility that new immigrants will become permanent wards of the welfare state rather than workers in the mainstream of the economy.¹³ This fear is not exclusive to immigrants, though. Danish and Swedish interviewees often expressed the view that it had become routine for the native born to lapse into reliance on the state as well. As one young man (age 29) explained, "Denmark is the sort of country where a lot of people have a very convenient attitude to a lot of things like [state assistance]."

It is too easy not to care at all. It is too easy not to have a job but still getting by, some people don't have to fight for these things. I think that the entire systems should be changed. But this has also been subject to discussion, some people don't want to work, they would rather be on welfare.

He quickly added that state benefits were generous enough that they very nearly equaled the earnings of a minimum wage job, which reduced the incentive to work.

These concerns may seem far removed from the central concern of this article, namely, delayed adulthood, but for our informants, the connection was clear: continued dependence on the natal family leads to declining birth rates and a concomitant reliance for the nation on immigrants in Europe. But their presence catalyzes nativist sentiments because countries that were once relatively homogeneous are becoming more diverse. Are they, then, still Spanish or Italian? This is a major question in the new Europe and the answer is uneasy, qualified, and

¹³ One reason this should provoke concern is that in some Nordic countries, noncitizens do not have the right to work and hence they are almost, by definition, unable to join the workforce and blend into the labor market scenery.

prone to explosive expression as we have seen even in countries like Denmark,¹⁴ which are legendary for their *laissez faire*, egalitarian social morays.

CONCLUSION

The advanced economies of the West and the East are all witnessing an elongation of the pathway to adulthood. In the Nordic countries, residential independence is easily achieved, but the duration of education is increasing nonetheless and hence the “feeling” that one has not quite reached an autonomous plateau is as palpable among Scandinavians in their late 20s as it is among their age mates in Japan, Spain, or Italy. Swedish and Danish youth are able to live on their own from a very young age and experiment with partnership in a tolerant society, yet that freedom is enabled by reliance on the state in ways that Nordic parents and their children are no longer certain is a virtue. They worry that reliance on government for support has somehow made obsolete the ties that should bind the generations.

In the societies where “delayed departure” is common, the structural pressures leading in this direction are similar: weakening labor market prospects for young adults, reliance on owner-occupied housing that requires more capital than workers with temporary contracts can access, and a more affluent elder generation that can afford to shelter the next generation. Yet the cultural response varies considerably from one society to the next. Setting aside, temporarily, the nuances that divide respondents by class or region within their countries, we see a dominant interpretation emerge in each country. Broadly speaking, our Italian respondents were fundamentally happy with the multigenerational households that have emerged among them and while they did raise concerns about downward mobility, they rarely worried about the consequences of a delayed launch of the next generation *per se*. They complained, on occasion, but did not blame.

Their Spanish counterparts were far more political in their interpretations of the slowdown. They blame the government, and perhaps the corporate world, for making it impossible for today’s late-20-somethings to be independent. They can pinpoint the date (in 1985) when long-term

¹⁴ The publication of 12 Danish editorial cartoons in the *Jyllands-Posten* mocking the prophet Mohammed, testing the limits of censorship, provoked an angry outcry from around the Islamic world in 2005. The cartoons were accompanied by a text that raised the question of whether Muslims could be integrated into a secular society devoted to freedom of speech.

jobs were made obsolete by the creation of new contract rules that ensured new entrants to the market would find largely part-time or short-term jobs. Spanish parents and their children admit that there are benefits to their continued co-residence, a kind of emotional intimacy that they value in contrast to the austere parent-child relations of the past, but the dark cloud that surrounds this silver lining is very visible to them and they are certain about where to fix responsibility for this turn of events.

Japan experienced an abrupt economic disaster in the form of a “bursting bubble” in the 1990s and the recession that followed was exceptionally persistent. Of all the countries in this study, it was perhaps most primed to understand personal experience as a consequence of structural change. Yet one sees nothing of the kind in the Japanese interviews. There is no mention of the economic turmoil they have endured. Instead, a highly moral subjectivity emerges, in which the agents of delayed adulthood are either parents who indulged their children too much, fathers who abandoned their families for the workplace, or today’s generation of young people who—by virtue of their own proclivities—willfully refuse to take up the responsibilities that are supposed to come with age.

Comparative analysis across a range of countries suggests that very similar demographic facts come to assume a different degree of significance and distinctive patterns of meaning. Indeed, the main commonality across the delayed departure countries emerges in the policy responses of their governments, which are uniformly worried about the declining birth rate. As for the ordinary citizen, the “failure to launch” varies from a social catastrophe (Japan), to a somewhat milder structural frustration (Spain), to a nonproblem (Italy), while for their Nordic counterparts, the ability to launch early is taken in stride, but is accompanied by the nagging sensation that the generations do not need each other as much as perhaps they should. Too much independence looks too much like anomie.

The sociology of culture has much to offer in understanding the meaning of these demographic trends that are defining new patterns of household formation and reshaping the most basic institutions of the family, the labor market, and the responsibilities of the state.

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